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ABSTRACT

This digest is drawn from the spring 2002 issue of New Directions for Community Colleges, titled "Next Steps for the Community College." It summarizes three overlapping challenges facing colleges in the coming decade: educating a more diverse student body, assessing student outcomes, and maintaining the educated workforce needed to meet the increasingly complex needs of the students and institutions. Community college programs and services will be called upon to adapt to a population increasingly composed of underprepared students. Remediation is central to the emerging assessment and accountability movement in higher education, and represents one of the more important educational, social, and economic issues in the United States today. Assessment of student outcomes in community colleges reflects the greater diversity of the student body and the broader educational mission of the two-year institutions. In particular, community college assessment measures focus around student learning outcomes in the major academic areas, including transfer programs and career and occupational programs. Finally, enhancing the organizational status, morale, and career mobility of professional staff and faculty will be increasingly necessary to ensure that institutions maintain the expertise they need to realize the community college mission. (Contains 10 references.) (Author)

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Emerging Challenges for Community Colleges

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Digest

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Emerging Challenges for Community Colleges

By Pam Schuetz

In just over a century, the American community college system has expanded from a single institution to over one thousand colleges serving almost half of all students enrolled in public higher education. While community colleges have adapted successfully to waves of changes over the years, a unique combination of demographic and socioeconomic changes predicted for the next decade promises to challenge the resilience of these low-cost, open-access institutions.

This digest is drawn from "Next Steps for the Community College" (New Directions for Community Colleges, Spring 2002) and summarizes three overlapping challenges facing colleges in the coming decade: educating a more diverse student body, assessing student outcomes, and maintaining the educated workforce needed to meet the increasingly complex needs of the students and institutions.

Educating a More Diverse Student Body

Community colleges typically serve students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, levels of academic preparation, educational aspirations, work and family responsibilities, and levels of English fluency than do four-year institutions (Williams). Mirroring the changing demographics of the nation, the community college student body will continue to grow in size and diversity over the next decade. Community college programs and services will be called upon to adapt to what Helfgot calls a "continuing wave of the *unders*," a student population increasingly composed of "the underprepared, the underrepresented, the underachieving, the underclass" (as cited in Williams, p. 68).

Remediation

Almost half of all students entering community colleges enroll in at least one remedial course. One recent study indicated that 60 percent of this remedial population are traditional-age students enrolling in college immediately after high school graduation (as cited in Oudenhoven, p. 39). The other 40 percent are adult students who may be pursuing personal interests, preparing for transfer, upgrading job skills, or preparing to change careers. While many students require some remediation, 80 percent of the remedial population needs only one or two courses, with math the most common area of remediation (Oudenhoven). The type and extent of remediation needed varies by students' socioeconomic, academic, and cultural backgrounds as well as by their educational objectives.

The projected increase in the number of underprepared students raises concerns that limited college resources may be overwhelmed by demands for remediation and that other desirable college programs such as transfer programs, career and occupational programs and noncredit and continuing education offerings may be adversely affected. Some taxpayers or state boards of education argue that remediation should not be offered in college, saying that the public is being charged twice for what should have been learned in high school and that remediation "dumbs down" the college curriculum. Others argue that as long as colleges admit underprepared students, they are responsible for providing them with the help that they need. Remediation is central to the emerging assessment and accountability movement in higher education, and represents one of the more important educational, social and economic issues in the United States today (Oudenhoven).

Assessing Student Outcomes

The ultimate purpose of assessment of student outcomes is to improve teaching, learning, and delivery of services to students. Assessment is increasingly linked to accreditation, accountability, and performance funding in higher education (Seybert). While similar to four-institutions, assessment of student outcomes in community colleges reflects the greater diversity of the student body and the broader educational mission of these institutions. In particular, community college assessment measures tend to focus around student learning outcomes in the major academic areas common to most community colleges, including transfer programs and career and occupational programs.

Transfer Outcomes

The transfer function has been a primary component of the community college mission since two-year colleges were first created. At the state level, transfer outcomes can serve as a measure of these institutions' educational outcomes, providing a perspective by which stakeholders can assess the effectiveness of community colleges in baccalaureate degree attainment. Three core indicators are typically used to assess the transfer function: the number of students who transfer in a given year, the transfer rate (usually defined as the number of "students who transfer" divided by the number of "students who could have transferred" over a particular time period), and the academic performance of students after transfer (Alfred, Ewell, Hudgins, and McClenny as cited in Seybert). Common methods of defining and tracking these indicators have proven elusive and questions remain as to whether simple calculations can adequately represent increasingly complex, nonlinear student transfers among high school, community colleges, and four-year institutions (Townsend).

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Vocational Education

Almost half of the community college student population enrolls in vocational education programs each year. Community college programs prepare much of the nation's mid-skilled workforce, which includes three-quarters of all American employees, for jobs in business, health care, engineering, computer and information technologies, and child care (Bragg).

Federal funding for postsecondary vocational education programs is rising, vocational enrollments are keeping pace with increases in general enrollment, and high school and college participation in various vocational programs is strong. On the other hand, there is concern that most postsecondary vocational programs are not meeting requirements for integrating academic and vocational curricula as dictated by federal vocational legislation of the 1990s (Bragg). While recent literature indicates that the greatest progress has been made in assessing career and occupational programs, and to a lesser extent, in assessing transfer and general educational outcomes, further research is needed to clarify types, levels, and measures of desired student outcomes (Seybert).

Maintaining an Educated Workforce

Some scholars predict that high rates of full-time faculty retirement coinciding with a surge of as much as 20 percent in the size of the student population over the next decade will produce a serious faculty shortfall (Gibson-Harman, Rodriguez, Haworth). Others suggest that this predicted faculty shortfall is illusory, since the actual number of full-time faculty needed in community colleges will be mitigated by fewer numbers of students attending than predicted, the incorporation of information technology into classes and the increased use of part-time faculty. However, even if the shortfall does not materialize, there is consensus in the literature that community college faculty will need professional development opportunities and incentives to adapt to the wider range of student needs and the new place of technology in effective course design and delivery.

If the faculty shortfall does materialize, community colleges may find it difficult to recruit qualified faculty since few graduate programs or faculty development initiatives adequately address the professional development needs of community college faculty. Suggestions to offset the potential faculty shortfall include strengthening graduate programs for prospective faculty, improving "in-house" college faculty development efforts geared toward current faculty, and offering part-time faculty development opportunities that lead to full-time teaching positions (Gibson-Harman, Rodriguez, Haworth).

The number of professional staff in community colleges – defined as employees who hold jobs requiring a master or doctoral degrees but who are not faculty, researchers, upper-level administrators or clerical workers -- has grown significantly over the past 25 years (Gibson-Harman, Rodriguez, Haworth). These professional staff have educational credentials and experience equal to most community college faculty and perform essential functions yet are consistently paid much less and accorded lower status within the strongly hierarchical community college organization. Enhancing the organizational status, morale, and career mobility of professional staff will be increasingly necessary to ensure that this vital group of educated professionals has a stake and a role in fulfilling the mission and meeting the challenges facing community colleges.

Conclusion

As the size and diversity of the college-going population surge in the coming decade, community colleges will be pressed to meet a broader, more dynamic range of student needs and aspirations. College programs and services face growing pressure to assess student learning and program effectiveness while promoting professional development of faculty and staff to meet institutional needs in the coming decade.

Community colleges offer one of the few routes toward greater social and economic well-being for students, their families, and communities. The way in which community colleges handle emerging demographic and socioeconomic challenges will help shape the quality and availability of low-cost, open-access higher education in America for years to come.

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